Phantom Pain

The word phantom means something that you can feel, but cannot see. After your leg is amputated, it is common to sometimes feel like your leg is still there. This is called a **phantom sensation**. If you feel pain as though your leg is still there, it is called **phantom pain**.

**Cause of pain**

The cause of phantom pain is not known, but experts recognize that these are real sensations, which come from the spinal cord and brain. It is believed that the parts of the brain and spinal cord that had been getting messages from that limb are now disconnected. Without input, the brain may be getting mixed signals that something is not right and interprets it as pain.

Not everyone with a leg amputation has phantom pain. When they do have it, the pain is very real, such as cramping, burning, stabbing, or shooting pain.

**Some things that can make phantom pain worse:**

- Being too tired
- Too much pressure on the residual limb
- Changes in the weather
- An artificial limb or prosthesis that does not fit properly
- Poor circulation
- Swelling
- Infection
- Stress

**Things you can do that may help ease the pain**

These feelings may get weaker and happen less often overtime, but they may never go away completely. There are some things you can try to help ease the pain.

- Use massage, tapping, and squeezing to desensitize your residual limb.
- Slowly tighten and release the muscle in the limb.
- Take medicine if your doctor orders it.
- Keep the residual limb warm.
- Exercise your residual limb.
- Change your position.
- Take a warm bath or use a shower massage, but only after incision line has closed and healed.
- Think about relaxing the part of the body that is missing.
- If you have a prosthesis on, take it off for a few minutes.
- If you do not have your prosthesis on, put it on and get active.
- If there is swelling, try an ace wrap or shrinker sock on the limb.
If you find that your prosthesis causes more pain, you may need to adjust the socks to improve the fit or have other adjustments made. Talk to your doctor or therapist about your pain causes.

**Other treatments**
Most people with an amputation find the pain happens less often and is less severe over time. In some cases, other treatments may be needed to help control the pain.

**Treatments may include:**
- **Mirror Therapy:** A mirror is used to show a reflection of your unaffected leg in place of your residual leg to trick your brain into thinking the leg is there and moving without pain.
- **Nerve stimulator** (called a Transcutaneous Electrical Nerve Stimulation or TENS): A low-voltage electrical current is used to stimulate the nerves.
- **Biofeedback:** By using sensors, you learn to control your body’s reaction to pain, such as relaxing certain muscles or slowing your breathing.
- **Acupuncture:** A technique in which practitioners stimulate specific points on the body, most often by inserting thin needles through the skin.
- **Hypnosis:** A technique in which clinicians make suggestions to a patient who has undergone a process designed to relax them and focus the mind.
- **Medicine.
- **Surgery.**

Speak with your healthcare team about the options available and what may be right for you.

**Phantom pain record**
You may find it helpful to keep a log of any phantom pain and sensations you feel. You can make up your own record to keep track - whatever works best for you. Keep track of when you had the pain, where it felt like it was, how long it lasted, how much it hurt, and what you were doing when it happened. This might help you find some of the things that cause your pain. You may also want to keep track of what you did to ease the pain and how well it worked.

**Sample Record:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Pain level (0 to 10 scale)</th>
<th>Location and type</th>
<th>How often or how long</th>
<th>What I was doing</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>July 26</td>
<td>6 / 10</td>
<td>Bottom of foot - burning</td>
<td>10 to 15 times - OR - 2 hours of the day</td>
<td>Waking up from nap</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>July 27</td>
<td>4 / 10</td>
<td>Bottom of foot - achy</td>
<td>5 to 10 times - OR - 1 hour of the day</td>
<td>Sitting, watching TV</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Talk to your doctor or health care team if you have any questions about your care.**

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